Easing the transition to university study: ideas and practice

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Abstract

Transition to university education is a challenge for many commencing students. A successful transition must be accomplished on a number of different levels and the student who manages one aspect well may struggle with another. Staff in varying roles throughout the university can and do aid this process. Their actions are often informal in nature, although they may also be part of structured and wide-ranging responses to particular issues of transition.

In order to capture these ideas and practices, the First Year Initiatives project was conducted. An online survey was conducted and staff members were interviewed to discover what they thought were the key issues in transition and what they did to facilitate the process for the students with whom they interacted. The responses were collated and presented as a web based resource. The project also aimed to stimulate discussion on the first year experience within the university, in order to encourage further collaboration between those with an interest in transition and to develop a community of best practice in supporting the first year experience within the university.

Introduction

Transition to tertiary education is well recognised as a complex process that will be experienced differently for each individual undertaking the process (McInnis, James and McNaught, 1995; Peel 1996). Commencing university study is a rite of passage for most young students from dependence to independence; for the more mature student returning to study, it may be a sea change or something akin to being caught in a tidal wave. These transitions demand a multi-dimensional response from the individual as he or she faces differing adjustments within a short space of time. In the pressure cooker environment of contemporary institutions, students must adapt quickly to survive and thrive.

Help with easing that transition can come from many quarters on campus. Academic, professional, general and technical staff members all have a part in facilitating students’ transition to university study. Each will have a different view of the adjustments required, the skills and attributes necessary to make those adjustments, and the outcomes that demonstrate that a successful transition has occurred. Each, in turn, will have their own thoughts and strategies on how to ease the transition, based on their observations of first year students and their experience of working with them.

It was to capture the varying strategies and knowledges around transition that the First Year Initiatives project was proposed in 2004. The authors were well aware, through collaborating with staff with an interest in transition, that many staff members in their university had developed strategies that they implemented to make life easier for commencing students. Some of these initiatives were quite simple and small scale: others were more elaborate and
required system change or restructure of curriculum. Some helped individual students; others aided the process of transition for an entire cohort. It was clear, however, that what was known to the authors was the tip of the iceberg and that there was a wealth of ideas and initiatives that could be shared and used if they could be gathered, collated and displayed in an accessible form. Thus the First Year Initiatives (FYI) project was born.

The FYI project had three main aims:

- to map and showcase initiatives taken by staff at one university to support the transition of FY undergraduate students;
- to focus on the quality of the FY student experience, in response to the findings of an internal survey of the first year cohort, the First Year Experience (FYE) survey conducted every four years; and
- to promote dialogue across campus on the FYE and create a network of people interested in transition and the FYE.

The results of the project were to be presented as a web based resource to encourage sharing of ideas and strategies in support of enhancing the FY student experience across the university. As it transpired, the resulting website developed into a resource for both staff and students, and thus exceeded the original goals set for the project.

**Theoretical perspectives on transition**

There is a comprehensive body of literature on transition issues and the first year experience of Australian students, largely attributable to the Pacific Rim FYHE conferences held in Australasia since 1995 providing a forum for discussion. The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of Melbourne has also had a focus on the first year experience, with the work of Kerri-Lee Krause, Richard James and Craig McInnis, among others providing key reports on trends over time across the sector, as in the recently published study: *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies* (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005).

Trends identified in CSHE reports have been supplemented by papers that adopt one of two theoretical positions: many adapt Tinto’s integrative theory (1995) whilst a more recent challenge to Tinto’s dominance has come from those who emphasise the need to respond to diversity within the student population (Cameron & Tesoriero 2003). Tinto’s focus on social and academic integration creates a climate where students are expected to assimilate into the dominant culture of the institution (Zepke, Leach & Prebble 2003). A more sophisticated understanding of diversity theory challenges the assimilationist approach by proposing that institutions must both value and learn from the perspectives that an increasingly diverse student population poses. This approach goes beyond mechanisms to retain students and help them succeed within the prevailing academic framework to those that demonstrate institutional commitment to valuing minorities, creating a culture free from discrimination and positively reinforcing diversity principles (Zepke *et al.* 2003).

Many papers that report single institution responses or programs have an element of each of these positions in their theoretical underpinnings. Universities want to retain students and have them succeed. At a university-wide level, this may mean fostering a general sense of identification with a particular institution and campus and encouraging students to adopt that
identity. For the sandstone universities, for example, this may translate into an identification with the tradition and heritage of the university, which is a powerful connection for those who have some link through family or social position but can be alienating for other groups new to tertiary education. An integrative approach must be balanced with strategies for supporting diversity. There is a body of literature detailing specific initiatives that have a dual focus: on the one hand supporting students from diverse backgrounds to succeed within a dominant academic and social culture on campus, in order to increase the representation of these groups whilst on the other hand promoting cultural change in the university to make it more welcoming to a broader range of students (Boddy & Neale 1998, Kantanis 2002; Skene 2003). That challenge acknowledged, transition programmes alone cannot affect cultural change within institutions. Such change will not succeed without a strong lead from the very top and a comprehensive policy supported at all levels throughout the institution (Wilson 2003). In addition, as Lawrence (2002) argues, students themselves must also develop appropriate interpersonal communication competencies to empower them to be comfortable within the culture that they are entering.

This dual focus of integration and difference is a key dynamic to keep in mind while assessing the approaches and ideas offered to aid transition in a project such as the one undertaken. Transition was conceptualized in broad terms as a series of adjustments, principally on the part of the student (which implies an integrative model) but also in part on the staff member (which implies a model more responsive to accommodating diversity). Expecting students to conform reinforces a deficit model that views a problem with adjustment as a deficiency in the student, not in the institution's inability to accommodate them (Lawrence 2002). Rather, the process we focused on was one of dialogue: engaging staff in a dialogue with each other; with the practices and policies of the university; and ultimately with students in transition. With dialogue, there is constant readjustment between partners in a discussion, not an expectation of adjustment that equates to assimilation. Engaging in a dialogue on transition was one of the key aims of the FYI project and underpins the framework of adjustment that provided the organising principles for reporting the results.

An important motivation for undertaking the FYI project was that there was no centralised transition policy in our institution as is the case in some other Australian universities (Emmitt, Callaghan, Warren & Postill 2002). The authors had visited other universities that had a more coordinated and integrated approach to transition and could see the value of encouraging a more formal approach. In particular, the resource kit 'Faculty 101: A resource kit – implementing and evaluating first year initiatives at the University of Melbourne' (Rhoden, Boin, Krause & McInnis, 2003) is acknowledged as a source of inspiration and ideas. Its aim is more formal in that it reviews established initiatives developed in response to a policy imperative, whereas the project described in this paper was less formal and aimed to capture initiatives at all levels and in all areas of the university. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of the FYI project was to move debate towards consideration of adopting a formal transition policy in our own institution.

**Methodology**

The project methodology employed interviews, focus groups and an on-line survey to collect data. After an initial literature review, 28 individual interviews were conducted with academic and professional staff, primarily to gain an awareness of the range of understanding of
transition issues for FY students among staff. Focus groups with academic staff who expressed a particular interest in the project were conducted in Agriculture and Natural Resources, Law, Accounting and Engineering. Drawing on this material and the results of the University’s 2002 FYE survey, an on-line survey was developed. The survey was endorsed by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and circulated in an all-staff email under her name.

When staff began the survey, they were asked to identify their professional role within three major categories. The staff roles that were included under each category are as follows:

**Teaching staff** (63 responses) Unit Coordinators, Lecturers, Tutors, Lab Supervisors/Teaching Assistants/Lab Technicians

**Faculty Based Support staff** (18 responses) Deans/Heads of School, Associate Deans, Course Advisers/Coordinators, School Managers, Faculty Administrative Officers, Computer Officers, School Administrative Officers, Technicians/Technical Staff, Computer Support Officer/IT Support Officer

**Centralised Support staff** (36 responses) Library Staff, Information Systems Staff, Residential College Staff, Student Services Support Staff, Student Administration Staff, Timetabling Staff, Facilities Management Staff (Security, Parking, Grounds Staff)

The survey was designed so that once the staff category was selected, an appropriate version of the survey opened that was relevant to that respondent, so that the overall length of the survey was shortened and respondents did not have to read through questions that did not pertain to their role. A total of 117 usable responses were received and they reflected a broad spectrum of staff across the university. It was encouraging to see that concern with transition went well beyond the staff in the Transition programmes within Student Services.

The survey addressed three types of adjustment for FY student: academic, personal and administrative. These categories were drawn from a model proposed by the University of Melbourne which included a fourth category, geographic adjustment (Rhoden et al 2003). In the FYI case, personal and geographic were collapsed into one category to shorten the survey and encourage responses.

In each section, staff were first asked to choose from a list of typical issues related to each adjustment. For example, in the Academic adjustment section staff could choose ANY of the following issues that they had encountered in their contact with first year students:

- Difficulty adjusting to a new independent learning style
- Having difficulty handling the study workload
- Not clear about what is expected of them academically
- Difficulty with studying and learning in a new language
- Lack of ability to write appropriately at university level
- Lack of understanding of basic research skills
- Lack of understanding of correct referencing

Some of these issues were chosen from results of the internal 2002 FYE survey administered to all First Year students at UWA, while others were identified from the interview process that also formed part of the FYI project. Descriptive statistics were drawn from responses to

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this question in each section.

Staff members were asked to add any other issues that they thought were significant in the context of each section’s adjustment type. They were then asked to share any things that they currently did to support first year students with any of the issues, and then finally if they had any ideas for what “could be done” by themselves or their colleagues to assist with these transition issues. Respondents were offered the choice of identifying themselves in any initiatives publicised and, as some requested anonymity, names were removed in all cases. Quotes were identified only by the respondent's area of support.

Results

The results were presented in five main discussion areas, each representing significant group of issues and the ways that they were engaged with by staff at the university:

- **Personal Adjustment 1:** Socialisation / Social Adjustments
- **Personal Adjustment 2:** External influences and pressures on study, including the work and study balance
- **Academic Adjustment 1:** Adjustment to a new, independent learning style
- **Academic Adjustment 2:** Learning skills
- **Administrative Adjustment:** Organising timetable, HECS payment, enrolment

Within each area of discussion, there were three main parts. Firstly, the results of the questions where respondents could choose transition issues from a list offered were presented as bar charts. Additional significant issues that emerged from that area of the study were then discussed.

The second section discussed the 'initiatives' that staff proposed. The responses that reflect the general wisdom and knowledge that recurred throughout staff accounts of their support provision for FY students (which provide a summary of good practice) were presented in this section.

The third section presented the initiatives, ideas and suggestions offered. These included individual, localised initiatives that sought to engage with a particular transition issue within a specific context and the more wishful 'if we had the resources' type of response, which were encouraged to provide impetus for further improvements. We recognised that resourcing was a key determinant in all our responses and practices. If we, as an institution, had the resources to limit all first year tutorials classes to 12 students or less, many of the problems of social adjustment that were identified by teaching staff could be addressed through small group work, with more time to engage with individual students, and more time for teaching staff to check that students clearly understand academic expectations and know of the support services available to them. However, we work within the current reality, and so tried to canvas those additional suggestions that might be implemented with few additional, or even with current, resources.

In some cases, the issues associated with each section were more significant and contained more material than the solutions or initiatives that were offered. In these cases the issues are discussed in more detail than the solutions.

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Results were presented as a new Transition website accessible to staff within the university and interested persons beyond. The website was launched at a function in March 2005 and can be accessed at:
http://www.transition.uwa.edu.au/page/63102

Discussion

The results of the FYI project need to be discussed within the context of the particular institution in which it was conducted. The University of Western Australia (UWA) is a medium sized, research-intensive, single campus university. It is a member of the Group of Eight universities or one of the so-named sandstone universities. As the oldest university in Western Australia, it has a high profile and attracts strong demand in first preferences from prospective students, which results in consistently high TER entry scores to undergraduate degrees. UWA enrols the highest percentage of school leavers into first year of any university in Australia: in 2005, 80.5% of the FY cohort enrolled directly from school and, as a result of the education system in Western Australia, these students are typically younger than their peers in other Australian states.

The high percentage of school leavers means that for this cohort, issues of personal adjustment are often related to making a transition to independent living. For some students, this will mean living away from home for the first time. It could mean moving thousands of kilometres from home, because Western Australia is a vast state and distances prohibit frequent trips home. Isolation and adjusting to an urban environment and different climate zone are major adjustments for these students. Other students may have moved less distance but still have to contend with learning to manage household tasks, finances, daily chores, managing their time and their workload. Many of the FY students are learning to drive and gaining their license during the first year of university: another rite of passage for young people and keystone of independence for many. These work/life issues are addressed within the Personal Adjustment 2 section of the results.

Issues relating to the social aspect of adjusting to life on campus are covered in Personal Adjustment 1 section of the results. The importance of making a connection and 'engaging' commencing students is now recognized as central to their participation, success and retention and to the quality of their experience (Krause 2005). The quality of the student experience is viewed as important by all levels of the institution. As UWA's Vice-Chancellor argues:

Of course, a university experience is much more than just a training ground for employment. We want students to be engaged with the University not only in the classroom but also in the sporting, cultural and social activities. Students should leave university with more than a degree. They should leave as well-rounded individuals capable of mature and critical thinking with a eye to the future well-being of society.  (Professor Alan Robson: Parents' Welcome 2005)

Krause, however, has argued that engagement is a complex term that can have a variety of meanings and we need to take into account these variations if we are to understand the concept in its fullest sense. For many staff interacting with FY students, a successful transition means students engaging with the culture of campus and gaining a sense of belonging. This 'belonging' is difficult to define but for many it means feeling accepted and positively identifying as university students. Whilst national survey data confirm that a consistently high proportion of FY students in 1994 and 2004 report enjoying being a university student, there was a significant increase in the number of students in 2004 reporting...

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that they were not particularly interested in extracurricular activities or facilities provided (Krause 2005, 5). Krause points to several reasons for a lack of engagement: competing interests in terms of paid employment and other responsibilities can mean that study becomes just another 'engagement' in the diary; a degree of inertia or apathy may be evident, again sometimes a result of competing interests; and, for some students, engagement will be a battle for survival. These may be students from disadvantaged backgrounds or international students struggling with cultural and language adjustments.

Staff from all areas of the University addressed engagement in their responses to the FYI survey. Many focused on respecting that students were going through a major transition and finding ways to ease that transition:

I don't have any formal initiatives. In the course of day to day contacts I try to remain conscious of the fact that new students are being bombarded with new impressions, new situations and vast amounts of information. No question from a student is 'stupid' no matter how obvious the answer. Each question is legitimate and important. If a student asks directions whilst standing next to a sign with the required information – I answer the question personally and don't just point to the sign. (Centralised support respondent -Library)

Others contributed ideas related to teaching practice that could aid engagement both as part of the student's social transition and academic transition. Sometimes these two were closely aligned, as in structuring academic programs to include group work or rotating discussion groups on a regular basis so that students interacted with different members of class. Some lecturers liaised with student societies to encourage a social activity early in semester that could provide a networking opportunity for students:

We have a student society and have a BBQ after the first year lecture in Week 3. Some of these students then join the society which provides lots of social opportunities.

Creating inclusive curriculum was another initiative used to encourage engagement through valuing diversity:

...discussion of different language and study backgrounds in tutorials (and in lectures) in order to demonstrate to everyone the great diversity in the class and the value this gives all of us as a group.

Other academic staff were aware of particular demands posed by their discipline and were proactive in setting in place practices that would support first year students. Architecture and design students find themselves in a very different learning environment and the faculty has put strategies in place to support them:

1st year studios are given home studios where they can work 24 hours. Assessment and design criteria are articulated in a comprehensive way. Tutors are especially sought for their potential teaching skills with 1st year students.

At the same time as many students are making the transition to independent living, they are adjusting to the independent learning required of them at university. School leavers find the learning environment at university less structured that what they have been accustomed to, and mature age students may find the discipline of returning to study after an extended break a challenge. Ideas and practices to ease this transition to independent learning are reported in Academic Adjustment 1, while the second section, Academic Adjustment 2 focused on learning skills.

Unsurprisingly, many academic staff commented on the challenge for school leavers of acquiring disciplined study habits and learning safety practices in labs. Many introduced one or more lectures on generic skills such as critical thinking and referencing, or invited library staff or learning skills advisors from Student Services to provide specific workshops. Others recognised that students had not absorbed all the information about services available offered
during the orientation period and provided:

...guidelines at the beginning of the semester, pointing out support services available, availing my time for advice, providing inspiration, regular talk sessions for goal setting, time management and study skills.

Individual initiatives were complemented by examples at course level. Employing group work as a teaching strategy to aid engagement was noted by several academics but with the proviso that this strategy needed to be well managed, so that students did not experience the negative outcomes sometimes associated with group work of team conflict and uneven contributions. This strategy offered challenges and rewards for staff and students alike:

We have developed two problem-based, outcome-based units that teach principles of team management and how to work in groups. The units are modular and we offer a variety of experiences ranging from hands-on work with native animals or livestock to social events such as BBQs. One-on-one assistance and interaction by lecturing and demonstrating staff in labs, tuts and fieldwork is crucial. The above units are extremely labour-intensive and we would do a much better job if we had more staff, especially tutors to support the teaching of modules.

Whilst teaching staff were the main respondents, faculty support staff and central support staff added their own observations and strategies. Many of these are reported in the section on Administrative Adjustment. It was particularly encouraging to see the commonalities in observations of the critical factors in aiding a problem-free transition from all groups of staff. Of course, only those who felt they had something to offer may have been motivated to answer the survey, although there were a few responses that observed transition issues but thought that it was not part of the responsibility of an academic to address these directly.

The comments have been drawn together into common themes with relevant quotations and the strategies and initiatives detailed, including ideas for what might be achieved with more resources, including time. A PDF file on each section of the project can be accessed from the information for staff pages on the Transition website:  
www.transition.uwa.edu.au

Conclusion

The FYI project was an attempt to map interest in transition issues across our university. The survey response demonstrated that interest was wide-ranging and extended well beyond academic staff to a very diverse group who interact with FY students and have an interest in ensuring that their transition is a smooth one. The project also aimed to increase awareness of FY issues and promote dialogue. The action research nature of the project achieved this aim and facilitated collaboration, particularly between Student Services and the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning. Within the University, in the year since the FYI project was completed, there has been an increased focus on the FY experience, with a major funding round for projects on enhancing the student experience for FY students supported by the Vice Chancellor. Whilst the FYI project cannot claim credit for this focus, it has contributed to raising awareness through the launch of the website, articles in the University's newsletter, UWAnews and Issues of Teaching and Learning. It has also contributed a resource that can be accessed by anyone with internet access. The ideas and strategies presented are often informal responses but taken as a whole, provide a useful and interesting resource for anyone preoccupied with the challenges of easing the transition of FY students.

Acknowledgment

The FYI project was proposed by staff within the Diversity and Transition Group in Student

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Services and funded by the Executive Director of Academic Services and Registrar.

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